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The "Company"

Banality of Power

With the recent revelations of myopic US intelligence on the outbreak of the October 1973 Middle East war, congressional investigations of the Central Intelligence Agency may be on the scent of one of the agency's most important secrets: its bureaucratic banality. Behind the imperial manner and machinations, the CIA has always belonged more to Max Weber than to Ian Fleming, a hostage to clients, careerism, inertia and root mediocrity.

Understanding the banality, as well as the outrages of the CIA (the two are often synonymous) seems essential to authentic reform of US national intelligence operations. Bureaucratic influences account for some of the more serious and ridiculous mistakes of what CIA minions call the "Company." Moreover legislative prohibitions of specific acts such as assassination may be unavailing in the larger policy sense if Congress does not confront at the same time underlying organizational motives which may only reappear in new abuses.

The missed signals on the October war were largely the result of a common bureaucratic phenomenon. Like the Foreign Service, in whose embassy precincts they masquerade, CIA stations abroad are heavily dependent on "client" relationships with their counterparts in host countries. Up to a point, sharing intelligence with friendly powers is simply maximizing channels of information. But as so often happens in the Foreign Service, these relations may tend to obscure the critical boundary between US interests and the client's.

The strength and accuracy of the client's views can affect the standing of the Americans dealing with him, can influence the rationalizations of US officials abroad and the scramble for attention and money in Washington. The CIA has other problems: the credibility of shared intelligence in the past, and the sheer laziness that grows with such dependence. The dangers are worst when the client is also "targeted" at the Soviet Union and thus able to provide information of great interest to Washington. By several accounts, all this made CIA reports from the Middle East in the fall of 1973 particularly vulnerable to the flaws and neglect in Israeli intelligence, whose nearly fatal miscalculations were almost identically reflected in US estimates.

Israel is hardly unique in this respect. For many of the same reasons, US intelligence in the Cyprus crisis was crippled by reliance on the Greek junta, while officials were skeptical of less "reliable" contacts among a more independent Makarios government in Nicosia. If an international race war broke out tomorrow in Southern Africa, CIA intelligence in the region would be similarly blinded by the cozy relations cultivated over the years with the Rhodesian and South African

security services, the outgrowth less of overt racism than of CIA's amoral operational affinity for technically sophisticated clients who also worry (or at least say they do) about Russian trade delegations and Chinese textile engineers. Obviously there is ideology in this problem. Yet if they probe deeply enough, congressional investigators will probably discover the CIA's zeal often owes as much to the "professional" seductions of cliency as to cold war passion.

Ideology may be most easily jettisoned at the agency's higher levels in Washington, where the fate of whole sections, and the careers in them, can depend on staying in the action, often regardless of the political niceties. This constant bureaucratic search for a *raison d'être* is another time-honored motive for policy throughout Washington, and the CIA, however bizarre its methods and purposes, is no exception.

As a member of Henry Kissinger's National Security Council staff in 1969, I was once invited to a lunch at CIA headquarters where a high official discreetly sounded me out about the receptivity of the Nixon White House to a little CIA mercenary operation to save a failing side in a distant civil war. There had been "inklings," as the official put it, that the President actually disagreed with prevailing State Department policy. A quiet operation could be mounted, at minimal cost, of course, to see that the President's "side" got at least an even break—and Secretary of State Rogers and his boys need be none the wiser.

It was a classic twist, worthy of John Le Carré. The CIA, we both knew, was already supporting the other side through the auspices of a friendly intelligence system; and the people the agency official was now proposing to help were getting aid from the Chinese Communists and were opposed by most of our allies. The whole war lay far beyond any political or military interest of the US. The unspoken point was that his colleagues were busily reporting successes and perils to the director at staff meetings, while this man, graying heir to a swashbuckling tradition, ran a section that hadn't toppled a government in almost a decade. My impression was that in his condition, he could have been persuaded to turn his operation on London or Ottawa; the political stripe of the "target" was of next to no importance.

The episode illustrated another prosaic bureaucratic drive in the CIA, one that the current congressional inquiry has too frequently ignored. For all its arrogance and license, the CIA has also been, like other bureaucracies, anxious to cash in on the momentary policy whims of the White House, and there have been abundant opportunities in the last 15 years. The official who came to lunch ready with his mercenaries would have been, after all, serving "national policy" if he had been given a presidential go-ahead, which was not impossible. Similarly the CIA did not embark on its own on a decade of ruthless meddling in Chilean politics. That intervention proceeded from the paranoia of Presidents Johnson